

Art in America

ONE WORK: SANFORD BIGGERS'S "7 HEAVENS"

By Yume Murphy September 8, 2021 12:57pm



Sanford Biggers, 7 Heavens, 2013, antique quilt, textiles, acrylic, spray paint, found object, 68 by 68 inches.

Sanford Biggers's *7 Heavens* (2013) boasts a sublime ethereality. The seven-foot-square red-and-yellow-checked antique quilt—currently on view at the Brooklyn Museum—pulls the viewer in through the artist's painted addition of a minimal yet exuberant gold form at its center, suggestive of a mandala with the spiraling contours of a pinwheel. Atop this form is a billowing cloud, presumably spray-painted upside down, as the paint drips impossibly upward in this final orientation. Biggers's painted alterations signal a divine dynamism that emphasizes a sense of movement, of rotation.

This work is part of Biggers's ongoing quilt series "*Codex*" (2009–), inspired in part by his experience viewing the Whitney Museum's 2002 exhibition "*The Quilts of Gee's Bend*." In his own mixed media quilts, Biggers draws on his study of Buddhism, sacred geometry, and the Pattern and Decoration movement. He folds those sources' visual vocabularies into the storied African American quilting tradition—specifically the lore of such quilts being used as signposts of the Underground Railroad—to imagine how quilts could now serve as coded signals for collective Black liberation.

Other details of this work point to that aspect of African American history. Along its right edge, the quilt is labeled with the year 1894, a time when lynching was common and racial unrest was ubiquitous, and also a period when quilting and sewing would have provided African American women with some financial and narrative agency. In the top left of the quilt, what looks like a West African Bolga fan is sewn into the textile and spattered with an exuberant mix of semitransparent pink and blue pigments. The insertion seems to celebrate the quilt's African aesthetic origins; its form also recalls the illustrated diagrams of slave ships. The cloud points less to the past than to the future, invoking the title's seven heavens—a layered conceptualization of the cosmos across many faiths—and inviting viewers to consider Black afterlife as it relates to the invoked history of slavery. The central mandala, traditionally representative of a spiritual journey, then comes to suggest another kind of journey, toward Black liberation. This is a portal to a utopian otherworld, a blanket for dreaming of what could be.